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BELGIUM'S LINGUISTIC DISPUTE

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BELGIUM'S LINGUISTIC DISPUTE

The rivalry between Belgium's Dutch-speaking Flemings and French-speaking Walloons has, over the years, become more intense. The Flemings have a growing numerical superiority, but the Walloons have the more widely recognized French culture behind them. Any Belgian government may face a crisis at almost any time because of the ministers' inability to agree on measures affecting the two groups. The Belgian Parliament will have before it this fall a number of issues directly related to the country's language division, and on issues of this nature tempers run high. The linguistic dispute may, within the next few years, lead the Belgians to transform their unitary state into a loose federation of Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels.

The rivalry between the two language areas played a role in the relocation of NATO. The Belgian Government selected the economically depressed Casteau in Wallonia as SHAPE's new site, despite little enthusiasm on the part of NATO officials. The government hopes Wallonia will thus feel compensated to some extent for the greater industrial investment in Flanders in recent years.

Background

Belgium's linguistic problem has its origin in the early settlement of the area by Celtic and Frankish tribes. The Celts were the forerunners of the French-speaking Walloons, whose official language is identical to that of the people of present-day France. The Flemings are the heirs of the Franks. Their language shows considerable variation of dialect but is identical in its written form and almost identical in educated speech with Dutch as spoken in the Netherlands. It is legally called Dutch (Nederlands). Each of the Belgian population groups, although indistinguishable in physical characteristics, has retained its separate language through a succession of foreign occupations. When the border for the Belgian state was drawn in 1830, no attempt was made to delineate ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines.

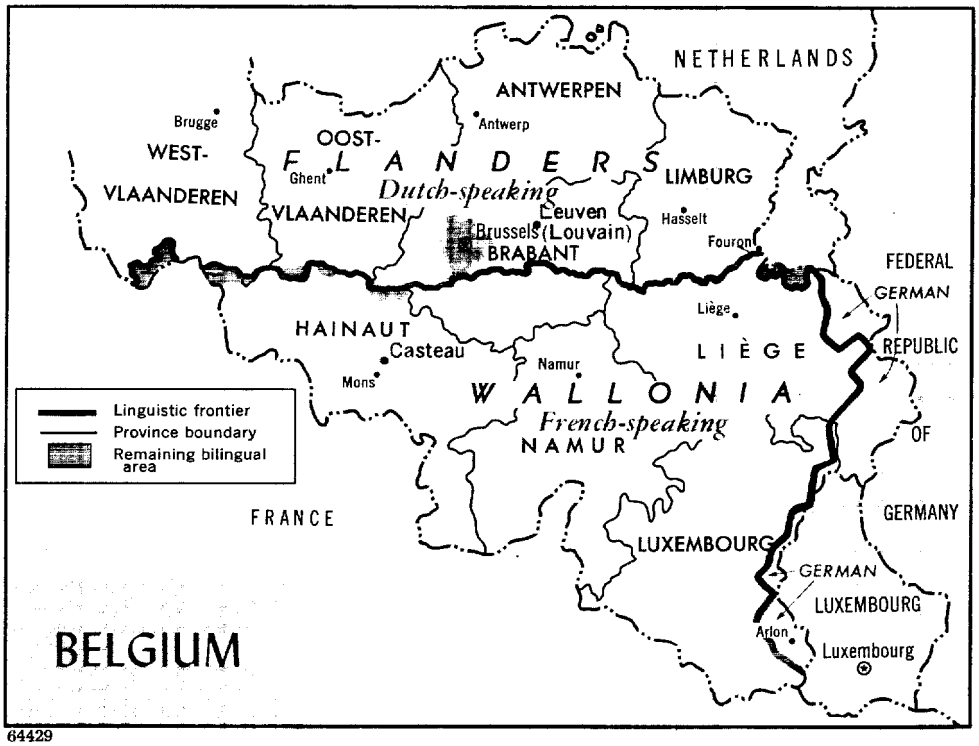
Outside Brussels the Flemings, who have the higher birth rate, now make up 55 percent of Belgium's 9-million population; the Walloons, 33 percent. The remaining 12 percent are mostly in Brussels where the situation is complex and there are no accurate figures on the relative

numbers of Dutch and French speakers. (On the eastern frontier, morever, there are some 60,000 German-speaking Belgians.) Brussels is both a center for Flemish immigration and the seat of the nation's French-speaking elite. Many Flemings who move into Brussels adopt French culture in a generation or so, a fact distasteful to Flemish nationalists. While some 95 percent of all Belgians are nominally Catholic, the Flemings tend to regard Walloon Catholicism as too lax and for this reason as well as the fear of losing Flemish culture, Flemish families tend to look askance at any influx of Walloons into their neighborhoods.

The Walloons, in the earlier industrialized south, have dominated the country from its independence in 1830 but have always been in the minority. Education beyond primary school, government, and the administration of justice even in Flanders were for the first 80 years of Belgium's history conducted only in French. A popular saying descriptive of most of Belgium's first hundred years ran, "French in the parlor; Flemish in the kitchen."

The Language Laws

Flemish nationalism began to reach significant proportions at the time of the first world war. A law of 1914 required, for the first time, that primary school children be taught in their maternal tongue. This law gave impetus to the use of Dutch in the public schools but was not practical to administer.



It was modified in 1932 to require that the language of instruction in primary schools be determined by the language of the majority in each municipality. Other laws of the 1930s--only partly implemented--required dual language use in administration, justice, and the army.

In 1962 and 1963, the Catholic-Socialist government managed with considerable difficulty to put through a series of linguistic laws incorporating a new principle: that a linguistic boundary (see map) should be permanently fixed. Up to that time a district might shift from one language area to another with population changes. The permanent boundary was a long step toward de facto federalism.

Divisive Effects

Tension between the two linguistic groups has periodically resulted in violence. There was a period of disorders when the first linguistic laws were proposed in the 1930s, and again after World War II, when Leopold III, supported by the Flemings and opposed by the Walloons, attempted to return to the throne. Another period of disorder began in 1961 and, after a brief lull, resumed with increased intensity in the summer of 1965.

Linguistic divisiveness is beginning to affect the political parties. Although the leading parties--Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal--have been national in scope, movements have developed to reorganize them on regional, linguistic lines. At its congress last December, the Catholic Party granted considerable autonomy to its Flemish and Walloon wings on cultural matters. Some regard a formal party split as inevitable. A schism is also present in the Socialist Party, where the Walloon element is dissatisfied with party leaders' lack of attention to Wallonia's relatively depressed economy.

Flemish demands for the additional parliamentary seats to which their increased population entitles them have created a serious problem. On the basis of the 1961 census, Flanders is entitled to 17 more seats in the Chamber of Deputies, Brussels to 4, and Wallonia to none. There is no dispute over the constitutionality of the Flemish demands, but Walloon fears of being subjected to a Flemish majority have made Parliament's authorization of the seats impossible. The Walloons responded to the last census by proposing that representation in the Senate be by province rather than by population. This idea met with an unqualified Flemish rejection. The parties have offered various compromise solutions but none has been acceptable.

The Louvain Dispute

Louvain, Europe's largest and most prestigious Catholic university, is the most important focus of the dispute this fall. Teaching there was exclusively in French or Latin

until 1932 when Dutch was introduced. Four years ago, under Flemish pressure, each of the 50 departments of the university was divided in two. Now every course is taught in both French and Dutch by two separate faculties united in the same buildings under one budget, one name, and one rector.

Many Flemings maintain that instruction at Louvain--which they spell "Leuven"--should be exclusively in their language since the university is on their side of the linguistic frontier. They demand that the French-speakers cede them Louvain and build their own university so that French will no longer "threaten" Flemish culture.

Belgium's small but well-financed pro-Peking Communist Party last spring helped foment disturbances at Louvain. It has not thus far, however, played a conspicuous role this fall.

A bill put forward by Flemish deputy Verroken of the Catholic Party last June would in effect have forced the French sector of the university to move. Consideration of the bill was refused by a narrow margin, with both the Catholic and Socialist parties splitting their votes on linguistic lines. The Liberal Party maintained party discipline and voted as a unit against Verroken's bill. If the Liberals had voted on linguistic lines the bill would have been accepted for consideration with consequent bitter dispute. Fear of this kind of vote is behind the Walloons' long-standing demands for constitutional revision which would guarantee their protection against oppression by the growing Flemish majority. The Verroken bill will probably be revived now that Parliament is again in session, and will be likely to bring new agitation.

Other Trouble Spots

Two other facets of the linguistic problem promise to cause trouble in the near future. Beginning this school year, the language of instruction in primary and secondary schools in Brussels and along the linguistic frontier is being determined in each commune by whichever linguistic group is in the majority. This policy is causing many complaints, particularly among French-speaking elements in Brussels. They maintain that many Flemish families want their children to go to school in French. The Flemings have in fact been more ready to seek bilingualism for their children than the Walloons.

There is also dissension over the prospective publication of decrees providing for the use of the language of the majority in regional government offices down through the local level. The requirement would tend to take jobs from Walloons in Flanders.

Outlook

There is likely to be considerable political tension over the linguistic dispute in

coming months. Division over the language issue either in Parliament or within the cabinet may bring down the government. At the same time, outbreaks of violence are expected to occur periodically, particularly in areas near the linguistic border.

Sentiment in favor of federalizing the present unitary state is growing. Such a transformation would not necessarily be catastrophic for Belgium since there has, in practice, been considerable and steadily increasing federalism in several fields. Government jobs are already divided on a linguistic as well as a party basis. Regional groups have increasingly gained authority over cultural matters and a definite trend has set in toward regional economic councils designed to influence investment patterns. These divisions, together with the growing use of Flemish in business and other activities in Flanders, are becoming an accepted part of everyday life. Few think seriously of reversing the trend.

At the same time, most observers expect the army, the Foreign Ministry, the Finance Ministry, and the Catholic Church to remain simply "Belgian," if for no other reason than their own institutional self-interest.

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